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Central America: A Test of Will

Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger has been named chairman of the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America whose mandate is to recommend an American strategy for dealing with what President Reagan calls "threats" to U.S. interests in the region, a strategy the White House hopes will attract public support. Mr. Kissinger's interest and experience in Latin America have been minimal. But he brings to his task some fixed ideas which he elaborated on in a discussion published in the April/May issue of Public Opinion magazine. Segments of the discussion, which also included Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Ben Wattenberg, are reprinted here:

Mr. Kissinger: I can understand senators voting against aid to El Salvador. I would disagree with them, but I can understand it. I can also understand supporting an increase in aid. I cannot understand the rationale for cutting it.

Giving the administration half of what it asks for will put us in the worst possible position. It is just enough to be involved and surely not enough to succeed.

In fact, no one is asking what it takes to prevail. Not even the administration has answered that. Its program strikes me as having been set by its estimate of the maximum Congress will appropriate, not a strategic or political assessment. . . .

We have wasted precious time in addressing the Central American situation. The speech the president gave on April 27 should have been made at the very beginning of the administration to explain the issues to the American people and to relate them to a concrete program. . . .

Mr. Wattenberg: Is Central America the test of our will now?

Mr. Kissinger: If we cannot manage Central America, it will be impossible to convince threatened nations in the Persian Gulf and in other places that we know how to manage the global equilibrium. We will face a series of upheavals that will absorb so much of our energies that we will be deflected from our previous policies.

Mr. Wattenberg: Is it the test of our society? Are we prepared to defend ourselves?

Mr. Kissinger: It is a test. I am not saying the test. . . .

Mr. Wattenberg: Do you support the administration's policy of covert assistance to insurgents, freedom fighters, whatever, in Nicaragua?

Mr. Kissinger: Yes, I do. It escapes me why we have to apply the Brezhnev doctrine in Central America and assert that any Communist government that has established itself can never be changed.

As a policy, I support it. But I don't think it can be carried out with the present system for handling covert operations. If the purpose of the covert operations is to prevent infiltration from

Nicaragua through Honduras, then I would rather see an overt American military presence on the Honduran-Nicaraguan border.

I am sympathetic to the covert operations if we can still conduct them the way their name implies. But if covert operations have to be justified in a public debate, they stop being covert and we will wind up losing public support. So, I support the concept — if not every last application. . . .

How large can a covert operation be and still be covert? Can you run a covert war? When you get to that level of activity you have to ask yourself whether you are not better off doing it overtly. I wouldn't make a general rule, but it is something to consider.

Mr. Wattenberg: An overt covert action in Nicaragua is a war. Should the United States of America go to war with Nicaragua?

Mr. Kissinger: No. If the stated objective is to prevent infiltration, then I would prefer an overt action. I support the idea of giving military equipment to guerrillas that fight the Sandinistas. That is a legitimate exercise of our intelligence function. . . .

But we should stop short of running a war as in Laos. In retrospect, it was a mistake to fight that as a CIA-supported war. We should have done it openly. Everyone knew what we were doing. It had gone beyond the limits of what you can call a covert operation. It is worth discussing at what point Nicaragua gets to this stage.